

Life experience and alcohol: 60–75-year-olds' relationship to alcohol in theme interviews¹

Introduction

According to statistics based on surveys, alcohol consumption among older Finns has steadily increased since the 1980s and there are less and less older people who don't drink at all – especially among women (e.g. Ahlström 2007; Sulander et al. 2006; Sulander 2007; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2006). The drinking habits of older adults have also sparked discussions in the media; it is felt that there is a new group of people in Finnish society now that should be worried over: older heavy drinkers and alcoholics. Especially the increased consumption among older women has caused concern, but, on the other hand, some have defended the right of "grannies" to drink how they see fit (cf. Oinonen 2008). Alcoholic beverages appear to be more and more a part of everyday life also for ageing Finns, both men and women. However, research on the alcohol consumption of older adults in Finland is still rather scarce, and there are notably few quali-

ABSTRACT

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The article describes drinking habits of Finnish older adults and their relationship to alcohol. The study is based on the analysis of theme interviews among 60–70-year-old urban people. The method was biographical, qualitative content analysis. Alcohol consumption of the older adults was investigated through the analysis of changes in the use of alcohol during life course and the features of current drinking habits. The article argues that events of both life course and changing Finnish alcohol culture have shaped the drinking habits of older adults. The drinking habits and meanings given to alcohol consumption among older adults vary in many respects. A common factor in the drinking habits of older adults is the everyday nature of drinking; as with other Finns of today alcohol has become more commonplace than before. However, for the great majority of older adults, advanced years have produced skills in controlling the alcohol use and avoiding intoxication. The skill to consume alcohol within moderation has evolved with age and the course of life.

■ KEYWORDS

older adults, drinking habits, theme interviews, drinking career

1) This article has been published in Finnish in *Gerontologia* 23 (1): 3–13, 2009. We thank *Gerontologia* for the permission of re-publication.

tative studies (see, however, Tourunen 1993; Tolvanen & Jylhä 2005). This article is based on a qualitative study conducted in the Too Much is Always Too Much – Ageing and Alcohol project (see also Haarni & Hautamäki 2008). The purpose of the article is to analyse the relationship third-age people have with alcohol: how does long life experience affect drinking habits and what are those habits actually like in the everyday life of older adults?

When examining alcohol use among older adults, one must remember that as a group, they are as heterogeneous as any other age group of people. It is therefore not possible to talk about older adults as one, uniform category of alcohol consumers – there are many kinds of people and many ways of consuming alcohol. It is estimated that the increased consumption, causing concern in the public arena, affects approximately 5–10 per cent of the age group (Aalto & Holopainen 2008), in other words, a fairly small part of the older population. The majority of older adults consume alcohol in moderation.

Even though the drinking habits of older adults are in many ways the same as those of the rest of the population, alcohol consumption of older adults is more clearly affected by the course of their life and habits that have formed over decades. One's way of drinking is not just a habit in the here and now, but a path over the course of life. Our analysis thus focuses on the past and present drinking habits of 60–75-year-olds and the effects of long life experience on both alcohol consumption and views on alcohol. The alcohol use in late adulthood is approached as a cultural and social phenomenon rather than an alcohol political problem or a health issue.

Data and methods

For the study, 31 current or ex consumers of alcohol aged 60–75 were interviewed in the autumn of 2006. The study included many kinds of alcohol consumers in order to analyse different kinds of relationships to alcohol – only people who had abstained from alcohol all their life were excluded. In order to assure the variety of different alcohol consumers, older adults were looked for using the "snowball" method and by posting an interview request on a website for wine aficionados. A research permission was also sought from seven different actors in social, addiction or elderly services, who organise services ranging from club activities to housing services. In order to protect the anonymity of the subjects, these places and actors are not introduced in more detail. A written informed consent was asked of all those known to be a client of one of the services; the consent was granted orally by the other subjects. (Haarni & Hautamäki 2008, 15–18.)

All subjects lived in cities, mainly in the capital area of Finland, so the analysis focuses on drinking habits of urban older adults. The majority of the subjects aged 60–75 were under 70 years of age; the median year of birth was 1940. 16 subjects were women and 15 men. At the time of the interview, 11 were married, 5 unmarried, 10 divorced and 4 widowed or lost a partner; 14 had passed the matriculation examination, eight the middle school, and eight had at least the equivalent of elementary school studies. 28 subjects had retired, one was unemployed and two still working; one of the retired subjects still had a business. Prior to retirement, the subjects had worked in a variety of blue and white collar professions; their occu-

pations ranged from managing director to auxiliary nurse. Most of the subjects, 22, lived at home at the time of the interview and nine used some kind of housing services. All in all life, for most of the subjects, was characterised by a feeling of an earned freedom of retirement, a fairly good health and reasonable – albeit for some fairly scant – income.

The interview schedule combined both a thematic and a biographical approach. First, the subjects were asked about their life stories, starting from their childhood and ending at the present time. Their current situation and lifestyle were then charted for example by asking about their social relationships, state of health and everyday routines. In addition, the experiences of ageing and retiring were discussed. Alcohol consumption was approached both from a biographical point of view and by charting the subjects' current consumption: they were asked how they had used alcohol in the past and how they used it now. Also their opinions about alcohol policy and the relationship between ageing and alcohol were discussed. In the article, the subjects' talk about their individual alcohol consumption histories and their current consumption is analysed. In addition, the talk regarding the relationship between ageing and alcohol is examined.

The interview data was analysed qualitatively with the help of content analysis, partly using biographical analysis (see e.g. Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002; Wengraf 2001). Both authors have scrutinized the data separately; the two individual inspections were conducted to test the interpretations and to increase the reliability of the study. Based on the initial readings and

the themes covered in the interviews, a coding framework was constructed, which was then used when the data was examined by themes in more detail. Within the themes, the subjects' answers were analysed for similarities and differences in order to construct categories, some of which were considered ideal types. In addition, utterances regarding the subjects' drinking habits at each stage of their life were collected from the data to construct alcohol consumption biographies.

Different kinds of drinking careers

Alcohol consumption of older adults can and ought to be examined by looking at how drinking and the role of alcohol have varied over time. Alcohol consumption – also among older adults – has been examined through the concept of a drinking career. Among older adults drinking careers have been differentiated by the onset of problem drinking; whether it is a continuation of earlier, long-term problematic use or if the problematic consumption has started only at later age (early/late onset drinking career) (e.g. Dufour & Fuller 1995). The concept of the drinking career has thus been used as a description of the stages of problem drinking, and a drinking career has consisted of initiation, experimentation, casual use, habitual use, dependency and possible stoppage (see e.g. Shaw 2002).

In the present article, we have used the concept of a drinking career differently, as representing trajectories of alcohol use, without implying problem use. We use the concept to characterise the alcohol biographies of all kinds of alcohol consumers. By constructing drinking careers from the

interview data, we have examined the variation in the subjects' alcohol consumption over time in order to analyse the individual trajectories leading to the drinking habits they now have. We constructed an alcohol biography of each participant based on the information provided over the course of the interview. A few of the subjects talked of their drinking career in a narrative form, but with most of them, we collected the information relevant to alcohol consumption at various stages of their lives and assembled the material into an alcohol biography. The drinking careers dealt with here are thus condensed and simplified constructions of what individual subjects told us.

Often, the first encounters with alcohol took place within the family and through male family members: many subjects talked about the alcohol consumption of the father or an uncle; mothers, however, were usually described as non-drinkers. The subjects' first personal experiments with drinking sometimes took place in adolescence, but the majority of subjects probed alcohol for the first time in young adulthood. After the experiments the trajectories began to differ – for some, alcohol became a significant part of a lifestyle, for others it played a minor role.

As far as the alcohol consumption of older adults is concerned, the most interesting thing about drinking careers is the direction in which they are headed now. As a drinking career reflects first and foremost the changes in one's relationship with alcohol, the direction of a drinking career can be similar for people who consume alcohol on different levels: for example, both heavy drinkers and moderate drinkers may have cut down on their

consumption over time, or, correspondingly, consumption might have increased over time regardless of how much alcohol older adults consumed when they were younger. By examining drinking careers of older adults we can also look at how retirement or other age-related changes are told to affect the subjects' drinking habits. In the following, we present older adults' drinking careers in relation to aging.

Based on the descriptions of the subjects, five types of drinking careers were found. A *downward drinking career* referred to alcohol consumption that decreased as the person aged. A mildly downward drinking career was often characterised by moderate or liberal controlled consumption in adulthood, which then started to decrease with age. Subjects with a mildly downward drinking career were people in whose life alcohol was used since youth. Alcohol, for this group, has always been a part of their lifestyle and some were interested in e.g. wine tasting or single malt whiskies, but as they aged, they cut down on consumption.

Those with a steeper, sharply downward drinking career were typically people who had used alcohol heavily at earlier stages of their lives. Some of them had also been in contact with the social service system because of an alcohol problem. All of them, however, had started to cut down on their consumption as they aged. A sharply downward drinking career is characterised by a fairly significant reduction in alcohol consumption – both in frequency and in quantity – and an increased ability to control one's consumption at a later age.

The reasons for cutting down on consumption were varied for both those with a mildly downward and for those with a

sharply downward drinking career, but the most common reason was that one's body could no longer tolerate as much alcohol as it used to. The physiological effects of alcohol on the aging body were noted and in order to avoid unpleasant consequences, people cut down as they aged. In addition to physiological factors or experiences of alcohol use as problematic, a downward turn in one's consumption might also have been influenced by attitudes towards ageing and alcohol use. Norms associated with age, gender and alcohol – recognised and brought up by the subjects themselves – meant that heavy drinking especially among older women was viewed unfavourably and considered inappropriate. According to the subjects, all the way up to the late 1960s women's drinking was often disapproved of or even condemned, and this can still be seen in how the older generations view alcohol. Only after the liberation of alcohol control policy in Finland did the cultural norms of teetotaler women begin to loosen and women's alcohol consumption became more common (see also Kuusi 2004, 296–326; Simpura & Karlsson 2000).

Upward drinking careers characterised people whose alcohol consumption began to increase in adulthood. Mildly upward drinking careers were also associated with the more general changes in Finnish alcohol culture. Serving alcohol became an integral part of both social life and entertaining business associates, and many subjects talked about how alcohol began to be viewed more positively in the 1970s and how this affected their relationship with alcohol. For the subjects in this group, alcohol consumption had slowly increased over the years.

Also for the majority of those subjects with a more sharply upward drinking career, alcohol had become a part of the lifestyle during working years, before retirement, albeit for some the development was recent. Most of those with a sharply upward drinking career were women and many of them were worried about their drinking. For some, the drinking habits of the spouse were clearly a factor. Alcohol was consumed because it was a part of the lifestyle of the couple, and even if one was concerned over the consumption, it was experienced as difficult to change things on one's own (cf. Suonpää 2005).

Alcohol consumption that has changed from time to time in different life situations is represented by a *fluctuating drinking career*. Those with a fluctuating drinking career were conscious of their changes of alcohol consumption and reflected over why they drank heavily at some point; however, they were not exactly concerned, because they all used alcohol less now than they had before. These subjects had tried to control and at some point cut down on their use. The heavy use was in the past now. *Suspended drinking careers* had usually been fluctuating before: the subjects in this group had earlier had periods of sobriety or attempts at cutting down, as well as periods of heavy use. The decision to stop all together, after a fluctuating drinking career had typically been reached due to a serious illness or some other acute reason.

When the manner in which alcohol had been consumed had not changed over the course of the subjects' lives, they had a *steady drinking career*. The drinking habits of the subjects in this group had remained fairly similar over time. A steady drink-

ing career was typically characterised by moderate or relatively scant consumption. Alcohol played usually only a very moderate part in the lives of these subjects and they had not particularly paid attention to their alcohol use – perhaps precisely because their drinking habits had always stayed the same, regardless of life changes and ageing.

An examination of the drinking careers revealed that the majority of the subjects were either on a steady or on a downward drinking career. The general direction of the changes in alcohol consumption in late adulthood was therefore typically towards a more controlled and scant alcohol consumption. Alcohol use had become more uncontrolled for only a few of the subjects as they aged. The increased free time of retirement or the event of retiring itself did not appear to be a particular milestone in the drinking careers of the majority of those interviewed.

Current drinking habits

The drinking careers of the subjects, shaped over the course of their lives, had led them to have the drinking habits they now have. When analysing current drinking habits, we did, however, not only look at how often people use alcohol, how much and what kind, when, where and who with – factors that have traditionally been used to chart drinking habits (e.g. Paakkanen 1994; Simpura et al. 1993). We also paid attention to the various meanings the subjects associated with alcohol use. In the talk of the subjects, drinking habits were described above all in a situated manner: alcohol was consumed in different places at different times with different people and for different reasons. As the subjects

described typical situations where alcohol was used, they also brought up many of the rituals, moods and environments that were associated with drinking. The current drinking habits of older adults are thus not only shaped by the course of their lives, but also a part of their lifestyles. Drinking habits also encompass various values and meanings, including normative beliefs about health and the right and wrong ways of using alcohol.

When analysing the drinking habits, we wanted to pay attention also to the different styles of using alcohol and especially to the level of control that was exercised. As the analysis of the data progressed, we named the various drinking habits according to the “skill of drinking”, the art and mastery of alcohol use, because the descriptions of the habits always included the aspect of control. Thus, the skill of drinking was divided into two categories: controlled and uncontrolled. The amount of consumption the subjects reported was divided into three categories: large, average and small. Based on these two variables, a matrix could be formed, where a controlled drinking habit is characterised either by a hedonistic, frequent use, stable mid-range use, or scant consumption in special events, such as parties. An uncontrolled drinking habit, on the other hand, is characterised by heavy use, reactive use or, at the low amount end, occasional slips. Within these categories – as in the subjects’ life situations – various occasions, reasons and meanings associated with drinking abound. The matrix is thus comprised of ideal types, and is meant to showcase the variety of drinking habits among older adults (Figure 1).

Drinking habits of older adults			
S K I L L			
		Uncontrolled	Controlled
A M O U N T	Large	Heavy use	Frequent use
	Average	Mid-range use	Reactive use
	Small	Special events use	Occasional slips

Figure 1.

A *controlled frequent use* refers to regular consumption of alcohol in fairly large amounts. Many older adults knew that they were pushing or even exceeding the limits of large-scale consumption for working population, but they were not concerned about their use because they did not drink with the intention of getting drunk – this was particularly emphasised. A controlled frequent use was – large amounts notwithstanding – characterised by often hedonistic enjoyment and alcohol had a central role in these people's lifestyles. The connection of frequent use to lifestyle is reflected in the following quotation, where the interviewee talks about the amount of alcohol he has used over the course of the week. He has sipped something almost every day, but in a controlled manner:

“I mean it is possible that there has been a day without, but I'm not going to swear. This is guessing really, but Monday or Tuesday – on one of those days, nothing. But then on the other day perhaps a can or two of beer, I'm not sure. Then [on Wednesday] we go to a

concert – and during the intermission we usually have a glass of wine. And also maybe, after the concert when we come home. If we've watched the telly, then maybe we've had a glass of wine. On Thursday either nothing or else the one can of beer. On Friday or rather on the weekend, it's nowadays three days as drinking goes, unfortunately. It of course depends on what we have on the schedule, but now we had an exceptional Friday. My wife drove past the opera house so she stopped to ask for tickets, we got like the last pair of tickets, that had been cancelled, and that then meant that on Friday we didn't take anything until we went there. So before the opera began we had a glass of red wine. During intermission we had nothing. When we got home I think we had a glass of red, not sure, but most likely. Then on Saturday we bought food and beverages. I bought a Guinness and a Velkopopovich and some dark beer as well and then two cans of Urquell. Then we got a box of red wine and that was it, I think. – In the afternoon we came back

from the store and I read Ilta-Sanomat and usually have the Guinness. Then I think we had fish, and white wine. I think we have an opened box of it in the fridge. A glass or two with fish and later in the evening white wine or red wine. The wife had one glass and I had two or three. I can't remember if there was a film on on Saturday or something. – Okay, Sunday, in the afternoon I had one Urquell after I'd raked the yard for a while and cleaned the gutters. Red wine with food, chicken stew, probably two glasses and in the evening after tea, I'll probably have the glass or two.” (Helmer, 61¹)

This quotation aptly shows how the drinking habit is connected to various situations. Helmer uses alcohol in many kinds of situations over the course of the week and often there is a specific reason for it – relaxation, dinner, cultural events. A drink brings a little something extra to everyday living: a regular evening is made more special by a glass of wine, reading a newspaper while sipping beer makes for a relaxing break or alcohol is used as a prize after the raking got done.

Even though hedonistic frequent use meant large amounts of alcohol and ignoring well-known health recommendations, the consumption was still always controlled on some level. It did not get out of hand because it was regulated by both avoiding getting drunk and either subjective views on what was acceptable for oneself or more social control, where the implicit rules of the social circles were important:

“That's the thing isn't it, what is considered moderate. You have to tipple in a way that makes you happy, but

you also have to know not to overstep the limits of others in the same place so you don't bother them.” (Veikko, 69)

Drawing the line between large-scale, controlled use and *uncontrolled heavy use* is not easy, however. Some of the subjects clearly struggled with uncontrolled heavy use and tried to control how much they drank – but sometimes failed:

“[C]oz I'm a bit of a binge drinker. It doesn't require much. It can be fun too, like hey, let's go out for a beer, and so it starts. I don't have to be feeling sad. We may just go out somewhere with the ladies and whoopsie, so it starts.” (Mirja, 66)

Uncontrolled heavy use may also have become more controlled as people had begun to age – some had gone through long periods of drinking when they were younger. They had, in other words, moved from heavy use to a more controlled frequent use. Jouni Tourunen (1993, 91) talks about how ageing male alcoholics tell their story through a before-now distinction: these days their alcohol consumption has inevitably decreased and they can't drink in the same way as they used to. Also the “ex-alcoholics” interviewed here attempted to control their heavy use:

“[T]he controlling is probably largely due to the fact that your body can't do it anymore. Before, your physique was so tough that when you hit the bottle, you could take it. But these days you need less – I can't say how much I take exactly – but you won't get drunk.” (Pekka, 60)

Among those who had earlier used alcohol heavily, ways of controlling the use included stopping altogether, moving from spirits to milder beverages and watching the amounts consumed more closely. A big bottle of spirits had become a smaller bottle out of which little tipples were taken throughout the day – avoiding intoxication and its consequences:

“So snifter yes, but no drunkenness or hangovers, it’s minimal like always with old men like me – at least the old men back in the days.” (Teuvo, 60)

Controlled mid-range use looked similar to frequent use on the surface: alcohol was consumed in varying amounts in certain situations where it had become customary. Drinks with dinner with friends, a bottle of beer after a sauna or a nightcap in the form of a glass of wine with the spouse in candlelight.

“It really is so that it’s become a habit, the coffee with the cognac. Why don’t we have a coffee and a cognac? But feeling like I’d really like that cognac, no. And it’s the same with red wine with dinner [alone], I don’t feel like having it. But it’s fun when you are out in a nice place in good company, then it’s fun to have.” (Anita, 71)

However, mid-range use involved far less situations where alcohol played a part. Alcohol was not a daily part of life, but was sipped “occasionally in a nice way” – alcohol was part of the lifestyle, but not a central or important part. Situations that involved alcohol use in the controlled mid-range use – and to some extent also

in the frequent use – were connected to social life and its events. Friends were visited or came over for a visit, met up for lunch or talked over a drink about the play or a film they just saw. The social environment was very tactful among older adults: alcohol was consumed in various social situations. However, unlike the young, the older adults were not heaving the unity of the group by getting drunk together (c.f. Simonen 2007, 56; Törrönen & Maunu 2005, 279), quite the contrary:

“Everyone can have a drink or choose not to. And these days you can’t even offer one to that many as most of them are driving. When they come to visit, they don’t want to use public transportation late at night. So, it’s usually the glass or a glass and a half of red wine. If there are six people, one bottle is quite enough.” (Hilkka, 69)

The positive aspects of alcohol in social drinking situations were emphasised in the answers of older adults. In smaller or larger groups alcohol functions as a social lubricant:

“Some of our best friends live in another town, it’s always nice when they come here or we visit them. We have a nice salad or something like that. I have some white wine and a schnapps with dinner, but it’s nice, because they are here. We don’t meet up very often, but we are really good friends. Back in the day they visited us at our summer house a lot. With my husband too, when we have some, the conversation is – or pretends to be – a bit wiser.” (Anja, 65)

Freer conversations and loosening up socially did not, however, mean unrestrained carnivalistic fun like it does among young adults (cf. Törrönen & Maunu 2006, 508–509). Social drinking in late adulthood was primarily about spending time together in a cosy and relaxed atmosphere, and did not require vast amounts of alcohol.

However, not all drinking situations where alcohol was used were pleasant; alcohol could also play a part in crisis. *Uncontrolled reactive use* could be characterised as “crisis drinking” where a negative event or situation sparked the urge to drink and the previously controlled use became uncontrolled:

“Well, [my partner] couldn't have any [alcohol] in the last six months [of his life]. I drank, coz I was so anxious. It's easy to say that one is using because of this and that, but at times I was so distressed that alcohol made me feel better in that situation. And the worse [my partner] got in the hospital – I, when I got back from the hospital – I felt bad. I thought that as soon as I get home, I have to have a drink. And as soon as I got home from the hospital and had a little alcohol, I could get some sleep and it helped. I sort of relaxed. I was just so anxious about it, I got used to it back then. I should have guessed back then that it wouldn't end well. But I didn't think of it like that back then. You can't know beforehand that that's how it's going to turn out.” (Helena, 62)

One's drinking could become uncontrolled as a reaction to many kinds of situations, from serious crisis described by

Helena above, to more occasional experiences involving anxiety, sadness or stress. The end of a relationship or becoming widowed, problems with a relationship or work could all result in periods of heavier use or less controlled drinking. Part of the reason why alcohol consumption of older adults has caused concern is, that it has been feared that lonely and socially detached older people look for companionship and comfort in a bottle. Some of the subjects did say that they used alcohol to deal with loneliness. The role of the bottle was to keep them company:

“I've had it as medicine, when I've felt lonely and feared closed spaces. For example travelling is difficult when I don't have someone to travel with, I get a bit panicky. That's why many times when I've gone on a trip in a car or a train, I've packed some Koskenkorva [clear spirit] along and needed it when I got to my destination.” (Esko, 64)

On the other hand, some subjects deliberately preferred to drink alone, to for example elevate a moment of solitude and relaxation:

“And often I take up a detective story, when I'm feeling a little upset. I lie down on the sofa wrapped up in a blanket, read the book and sip wine as the evening passes. When I'm feeling tired, I can go to bed at my leisure. So perhaps it's relaxing.” (Eva, 64)

Some of the subjects talked of being alone as a pleasurable experience. Part of the fun of retirement was the freedom to just be by oneself and do whatever one wanted with-

out social pressures. It didn't take a party or a carnival to make an occasion special, it could be done in a small group or even alone. In these situations, alcohol was a possible rather than a necessary factor in elevating the occasion above everyday living.

Controlled special events use referred to alcohol consumption that was so scant both in terms of amount and frequency that it was in many ways close to sobriety. Among the subjects there were, for example, people who, for the whole year, had only a glass of wine at Christmas dinner. Controlled scant use was characterised by the use of alcohol in special events only: alcohol was consumed very seldom for example in the form of a sauna beer or a thimbleful of cognac. The following excerpt aptly captures the controlled scant way of drinking:

"It's that I wouldn't even dare to call myself a consumer, it's quite minimal these days, the drinking." (Mauri, 69)

Sometimes special events use – and also mid-range use – could become occasionally uncontrolled. A person who usually uses very little could have an accident – a situation where they got intoxicated without intention – and the controlled use became uncontrolled for a moment:

"We were then eating at a restaurant and had – we were five women – so we had two bottles of red wine. And then we had cognacs with coffee. Well, one left and the four of us continued because one of these friends, she said that we ain't stopping yet. So, we went to another restaurant and sat at the terrace and she bought us Irish Coffees

and then we each had a glass of white wine. And then one left and there were three of us. And then she said let's go, let's go into a third place. I said, no more. I was already feeling like I never have this much." (Anita, 70)

An *occasional slip* to uncontrolled drinking also spoke to the fact that a person who normally used only little alcohol did not have experience of how the substance affected their ageing body, and therefore the state of intoxication may have come as a surprise. When one accidentally slipped from controlled to uncontrolled use, the slip was evaluated, above all, using individual criteria of wellbeing and safety – older adults felt that they had had too much when they had a feeling of having lost control.

When it comes to the current drinking habits of older adults, the majority of those interviewed consumed alcohol in a controlled and conscious manner – only a few of the subjects told us that they slipped to uncontrolled drinking. However, the categorisation of drinking habits also reveals the groups of older adults where alcohol use has been risky or could become risky in the future. On one hand, the line between controlled frequent use and uncontrolled heavy use can be very hazy; on the other hand, controlled mid-range use could turn into more frequent use when drinking occasions increase for some reason. Those who had ended up losing the control in one way or another were worried about their use and tried to control it, with varying success. A comforting finding in the analysis of the interview data was that those who had used alcohol heavily earlier in their lives had all cut down or stopped altogether.

The ideal of moderation

The subjects belong to the generation that has lived through the rapid changes in Finnish alcohol policy and culture over the last six decades. They recall the control policies of their childhood, like the temperance movement with its promotion leaflets, but have also lived through the liberalisation period of alcohol policies in Finland from 1960's to the present. The strict and even double standard attitudes towards alcohol in their childhood and youth have developed into a more tolerant atmosphere where drinking has become an everyday activity for Finns of all ages. Among this generation, observing the change to a more liberal alcohol culture has often been accompanied by personal drinking careers that echo the spirit of the times.

Perhaps partly because of this, the earlier ascetic ideals and the later hedonistic practices of alcohol consumption (see e.g. Alasuutari 1990; Törrönen 2000) have become intertwined and in many ways shape the way this generation consumes and views alcohol. Some of the subjects discussed the influence the earlier, ascetic alcohol culture may have had on their drinking habits. One subject felt that her early experiences had been useful in shaping her current, moderate drinking habits:

“And then when you look around in the summertime, what will become of these youths who don't think wine or beer is alcohol at all. What is that going to be like in the future, when we were so straight-laced in our time.”
(Liisa, 65)

Some of the subjects considered also ageing as a factor that protected them from

alcohol-related harms, because ageing brought tacit knowledge in alcohol use. The views that most of the subjects had on ageing and alcohol use were affected by the ideal and goal of moderation.

“Drunk? No, I haven't really been for a while. I have to say that for the past ten years I've managed so that I've never been in that bad a way, that I've always known what I've been doing. Haven't been out of my senses, like, when you get to bed, you ask, which country, what time and where are we. It's all been so well. I mean, as I've gotten older I've also gotten wiser and know when to stop. Learnt how to know how to stay in control.” (Heikki, 70)

Heikki's idea of growing wiser with time reflects the way many of the subjects viewed ageing and alcohol use: as they had aged, they had become experienced with alcohol. The goal of older adults – at least on the level of their expressed ideas – was to avoid excessive alcohol use. Alcohol consumption was monitored and controlled in many ways and various methods of cutting down were employed.

“So, we then took the sensible road, switched from medium-strength beer to light beer, thanks to my wife's actions. – The wife started drinking whiskey and got of course a bit tipsy like anyone would, so that's when we also decided that we wouldn't drink in large amounts. We collected schnapps glasses, we always had schnapps in our house. That came to an end coz you always ended up drunk. Funny enough that's what happens. If

you have five centilitres – back then it was, I mean for goodness' sake, five of those is a pretty little bottle of spirits. If that doesn't get you drunk it's a bit of a miracle. We switched to these smaller glasses, these hold two centilitres. And the schnapps tastes excellent from these and you don't get drunk. You can have one for many a song.” (Veikko, 70)

Of course, not all older adults felt that they had gotten better at controlling their alcohol use over time: there were also people who felt they used too much. However, even among those who worried about their drinking it was the ideal of moderation that produced the worry over what was perceived as excessive consumption. The ideal of moderation could also be seen in the normative beliefs associated with old age and alcohol. Some of the subjects talked disapprovingly of older people or their peers whose drinking habits did not live up to the ideal of moderation. When the subjects were asked how they would feel about a 75-year-old who was intoxicated in a public place, the inappropriateness of the combination of intoxication and old age was very apparent in the answers.

“Well, not really much, it makes one feel a little – I don't know, would the word pitiful be the right one – but like, someone of such high age is not exactly a pleasant sight in that condition. Of course it is not exactly an uplifting sight. Not that a younger person would be either, but an older person is even less so.” (Aatos, 62)

Aging, generation and period of time

All in all a long experience of alcohol consumption has, according to the majority of the subjects, resulted in improved skills of alcohol use, which could be seen in the subjects' descriptions in the form of a steady or decreasing consumption, avoiding intoxication and hangovers, and aiming at moderation. As far as the subjects' relationship with alcohol was concerned, ageing meant above all accumulated life experience – and along the experience, also self-knowledge with regard to alcohol use.

The role of ageing and life experience in the alcohol relationships of the subjects was still a complex issue. Their life courses, their current situation, and their physical and mental well-being were intertwined, influencing their views of alcohol. Also the period of time affected the opinions and experiences they had on alcohol. A female interviewee described the influence of aging and era in her own relationship with alcohol as follows:

H: “[T]he older I get, the more I've started to use alcohol. But I also think that society in general has changed in the same way. What with the liberalisation of medium-strength beer and all and then this wine policy. Well, I've always been less familiar with the strong stuff, but there are now so many wines that...”

IH: “You mean you sort of go with the mainstream?”

H: “Maybe I do, when you think about the situations and availability. Yes and also when I think about the living environment of older adults, where I want to live, so there is a gro-

cery store, a library, a chemist's, an Alko shop at a walking distance, so yes it does seem to be a part of my living environment now." (Eva, 63)

The interviewee considers the increase in her own consumption to be a consequence of the changes in society. The liberalisation and the increasing commonplaceness of alcohol and the "wine rather than spirits" alcohol politics in Finland, which started in the late 1960s, influenced the subjects' relationship with alcohol, and it was easy, especially for women, to adopt the new alcohol culture, with its preference on mild beverages and a more tolerant view of women's drinking.

However, the changes in alcohol culture are not only interesting as observations of individual subjects. When alcohol consumption among older adults is considered in a wider societal context, it is important to examine the significance of and relationships between the age or ageing itself, the era and the older age group or generation. The increased consumption among older adults is mainly due to the change in times and customs. The analysis of the drinking careers and current drinking habits of the subjects reveals that a minority had increased their alcohol consumption upon retirement. Most of them had adopted their present drinking habits during adulthood, following the customs of the time.

"But then the 70s came. I don't really know why it was that the alcohol consumption somehow got out of hand completely. I mean I've never seen so much drinking anywhere at any time. And in the so called smart set there

were a few famous characters, a few commercial counsellors among others, who thought it wasn't a party at all if not everyone – you had failed as the host of the party – if people were not completely wasted. And then they talked about the drunkenness endlessly afterwards. And I thought it was extremely boring, but I do admit that I too took part." (Sirkka, 65)

Those who had cut down on their drinking or stopped drinking altogether had also earlier used alcohol according to the habits of the time and their social circle. Many older people continued to want to use alcohol just like anyone else and in the same way as they always have. Some of the subjects found it odd to think that they should change the way they drink when they hit a certain age.

"In my opinion, if the [alcohol consumption] is moderate, isn't it just the same thing as with the younger ones. Surely it doesn't, if you get older, should you change your ways and become a strict teetotaler and wag a [finger]." (Riitta, 74)

Summary and discussion

In the present article, we have illustrated the drinking habits of older adults and their careers of alcohol use that have led to their current drinking habits. Analysing the subjects' descriptions, we discovered several different drinking careers: downward, upward, fluctuating, steady and suspended. In addition to their drinking careers, also the drinking habits of the subjects varied from small sips in special events to larger amounts heavy use. The drinking habits of some older adults were controlled, for others, there were occasion-

al or intermittent bouts of loss of control. The matrix of the subjects' drinking habits categorised the varying drinking habits of older adults based on the amount consumed and the level of control.

The drinking habits of late adulthood reflect the characteristics of both the generation and the era; they are varied and diverse due to life experiences, situations and environments. The majority of older adults have adopted alcohol as part of their lifestyle already in earlier adulthood, following, above all, the customs of that time period. Therefore alcohol consumption also among this generation has become a more everyday occurrence over time – just like among Finns in general (cf. Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2006).

It is important to note the variety of drinking habits and of the meanings alcohol is given in late adulthood. But even in a time when alcohol is commonly used, the subjects attempt to avoid becoming intoxicated and aim for moderation. Many have cut down on their earlier alcohol use or have all in all used alcohol moderately. In light of the present data, the drinking habits of older adults appear for the most part to be tempered. Even those who had had problems with drinking before had cut down on their drinking with age and increasing experience. The findings of the study support the notion that, among older adults, alcohol consumption settles down and is more controlled than among younger age groups (see Kortteinen & Elovainio 2003). The interview data suggests that an increasing control of one's alcohol consumption is a skill or at least a goal for many older adults.

The small and case-like data of the present study gives only a glimpse of the

drinking habits of older adults and they still await a more detailed analysis. Findings generalisable to the whole population would require further studies using extensive statistical and more detailed qualitative data.

In the field of Finnish alcohol research, the reliability of studies concerning people's alcohol consumption has often been discussed. Also older people are thought to downplay their alcohol consumption or choose not take part in the study if they consume a lot of alcohol (e.g. Sulander 2007; Aalto & Holopainen 2008). In the present study, the problem of modifying the truth was approached by talking about it directly with the subjects. The investigators also sought to get around the problem by asking about the subjects' alcohol use from several perspectives. Also, the goal of the interviews was not to accurately measure the amounts of alcohol consumed, but to provide a description of the drinking habits. However, it should be pointed out that the analysis looks at what people say about their alcohol consumption: the research cannot verify if what the subjects say is true or not.

The findings of the study further our understanding of Finnish alcohol culture and Finnish drinking habits. The subjects use alcohol like other Finns, albeit with a particular appreciation for moderation. The calming effect of ageing, where drinking is restricted out of a physical necessity – brought up by Jouni Tourunen (1993) in the context of the ways of speaking of old alcoholics – would, in light of the present study, apply to most older people, not only older alcoholics. In addition to physical reasons, the subjects of the present study also stated that they wanted to cut down

on drinking due to other needs, wishes or goals. This desire to control one's alcohol consumption is shaped by personal and social reasons; it reflects one's life history and experiences and the shared beliefs of what is appropriate alcohol consumption for an older person.

The subjects' generation has lived their childhood and youth in an era of ascetic alcohol culture (Alasuutari 1990) and this has had a clear influence on how they view alcohol; most notably in the ideal of moderation. However, this generation differs from earlier older generations who had a stricter alcohol culture (see Tolvanen 1998), because alongside the ascetic values, liberal and even hedonistic views on alcohol have emerged. They could be seen in the interviews for example in the variety of drinking habits. Attitudes towards alcohol have become multiple and more liberal.

Some of the subjects felt that their strict alcohol education continued to be a benefit and protected them against excessive consumption. Based on their experiences, we may well ask what will happen to the future generations of older Finns, who have not had the same kind of alcohol education in the liberalised Finland – will retired people consume as much alcohol

as those of working age when the baby boom generation reaches retirement age, or will the physiology of the ageing body continue to produce decreasing alcohol consumption in the later stages of life?

The findings of the present study suggest interesting topics for further research: comparing, for example, the socioeconomic and gender-specific drinking patterns of late adulthood would be important and interesting. As far as research on older problem drinkers is concerned, further information is needed in order to gain a better understanding of biographical and situational issues. All in all, a more thorough consideration of both biographical and everyday viewpoints (cf. Jyrkämä & Haapamäki 2008) in studies on the alcohol consumption of older Finns could prove very useful.

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NOTES

- 1) The names of the subjects have been changed.

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